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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of qualitative studies' antecedents among historiographers and of the positivist tide which nearly engulfed them. Humans live by interpretations. The task of social science--the basic task of qualitative studies--is to study these interpretations so that we can better understand the meanings which people use to guide their activities. This is what some historians have tried to do since at least the time of Herodotus. Social science's detour down the positivist path was prepared by Locke, Kepler, Galileo, Bacon, Newton, and Descartes. Man, in the new understanding, was at root a rational being, and once his true "nature" were known, so would be the natural laws of his own behavior. Dissatisfaction with the rationalists' mechanical view of man led to the excessively emotional, occasionally mystic view of man. The mystical undercurrents of Romanticism were probably at least partly responsible for the outpouring of philosophies (Kant's, Hegel's, Marx's) in the early 19th century. For most of the West, however, it was not Marx or Hegel but Leopold Von Ranke, who was to be the model for the practice of history. Ranke insisted that historians made a thorough study of the personality, tendencies, activities, and opportunities of the author of each document. With the positivists in the 19th and 20th century, history's purpose became to codify and, therefore, predict the behavior of men in the same way that contemporary physics seemed to be doing in the physical world. At the same time another series of thinkers, including Dilthey, held fast to the insight that man, through his history, is part of a dynamic chain of existence. In studying nature, Dilthey pointed out, man was always the outsider. (Author/RM)

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QUALITATIVE STUDIES: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANTECEDENTS

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Qualitative Studies: Historiographical Antecedents"

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Of all approaches to the study of social phenomena, qualitative studies most emphasizes the importance of "contextualizing" the phenomena under study. James Carey and Clifford Christians, in their helpful paper on the aims of qualitative research, write:

> If the world is dynamic and not a static system, if life is the fundamental fact which must form the starting point, then contextual wholes become essential to our intellectual enterprise. In a profound sense, human behavior is a total reality and isolating certain aspects may be done provisionally but always involves great dangers of distortion.[1]

Yet we who do qualitative studies may be guilty of failing properly to contextualize our own approach. Much has been made of the debt qualitative studies owes some social philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular those of the Chicago School. But little attempt has been made to trace qualitative studies' much older roots in the centuries-old tradition of historiography. Those roots have perhaps been obscured by the lapse of history-writing itself into positivist methodology, because of trends which began in the seventeenth century. This paper aims to provide an overview of qualitative studies' antecedents among historiographers, and of the positivist tide which nearly engulfed them.

A strong tradition in qualitative studies regards the symbol as the most logical unit of analysis in human affairs. It is the quality which distinguishes man from other animals. It is the added dimension, the interloper between receptor system and effector system which, as Ernst Cassirer and a number of others have pointed out, places man in a different universe from other

creatures.[2] Behaviorists, by ruling the symbol beyond the bounds of study, have eliminated the most worthwhile target for research.

A proper science of man must therefore center on symbols: which ones constitute reality for various humans and how humans manipulate those symbols to create order and meaning in their lives. A study of the collective behavior of humans, it follows, must center on the creation, maintenance, and alteration of the symbols and symbol systems which constitute the group's reality.

> . . . humans live by making interpretations. We are born into an intelligible, an interpreted world and we struggle to use these interpretations creatively for making sense of our lives and the lives of those around us. The task of social science, the basic task of qualitative studies, is to study these interpretations, that is, to interpret these interpretations so that we can better understand the meanings which people use to guide their activities.[3]

This is what some historians have tried, with more or less success, to do since at least the time of Herodotus. It is no accident that many scholars who regard themselves as working in qualitative studies feel sympathy for the subject matter and the methods of history.

Indeed, in one sense, qualitative studies can be seen not so much as innovation as restoration--an attempt to return to the imaginative method and the ambitious scope of history before that science was challenged, changed, and nearly submerged by positivism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That period saw the birth of the positivistic social science which was to dominate the study of man in the United States, and to reduce much of historiography itself to a reductionist recitation of political and diplomatic "facts." But a determined minority kept alive a tradition of a holistic view of man and the study of man and prepared the way for today's qualitative studies.

Social Science's detour down the positivist path was prepared by Locke, Kepler, Galileo, Bacon, Newton, Descartes. Miracles and mysteries in the natural world dissolved in the face of science and were replaced by an orderly, mechanistic

universe. Understandably--and unfortunately for the advance of historical thought--the newly discovered consciousness, which had so successfully been unlocking the secrets of the natural universe, expected also to unlock the secrets of its own. Man, in the new understanding, was at root a rational being; and once his true "nature" were known, so would be the natural laws of his behavior. The discovery of consciousness as a concrete reality was, as Ortega points out, a necessary intellectual prerequisite to modern historical theory. As thinkers tried to apply the method of natural science to man,

> the obstinate resistance of human phenomena to mechanical interpretation paved the way for the discovery of human life as a reality in its own right--a reality no less, nay more, opaque than the cosmic reality had been. . . . The recalcitrance of human phenomena against scientific treatment won attention for them and secured to them the character of a reality proper.[4]

Voltaire, who probably deserves the credit for being the first modern cultural historian (Herodotus having been the first ancient one), sensed that human reality was more than the aberrational, more than the catastrophes, wars, and ascensions of kings which had always been the subject of historical writing. He wrote about life, to use Ortega's description, as "modes of feeling, thinking, desiring, interweaving to form the hourly and daily background of historical time against which the glamor of those other patterns stand out in relief."[5] But Voltaire and other eighteenth century writers failed to capitalize fully on the insight. They fell into the trap which the seventeenth century had set for them, and from which there was no escape, given their view of man as a rational creature. If man was at root rational, then his historical permutations were distortions. To get at the reality, these historical disguises had to be removed. History, then, was worse than useless; it was a cloak to be ripped off, that the naked reality beneath might be discovered. It would take another century for the best historical thinkers

to realize that it was man's nature which was the illusion, his history the reality.

Dissatisfaction with the rationalists' mechanical view of man led, in Romanticist historians, to an excessively emotional, occasionally mystic, view of man. The reality of man, some romanticists maintained, defied intellectual analysis. Their rediscovery of the importance of the non-rational in man--the aesthetic hunger--was a needed counterbalance to the idealized rational man of the preceding generation. But their emphasis on the organic unity of national cultures and the ineffable spirit which permeated and guided such cultures led, eventually, into particularly chauvinistic and often racist national histories. Their intellectual position, as Barnes points out, had placed their theory of history in a vicious circle.

> Without giving any scientific explanation of the development of the spirit of a nation, they attributed the peculiarities of national institutions, laws, literature and government to the 'genius' of the nation, and then represented national character as the product of the art, literature, laws and institutions of a people."[6]

The mystical undercurrents of Romanticism were probably at least partly responsible for the outpouring of philosophies of history in the early nineteenth century. They ranged from the reasonably modest and, by modern lights, sensible, theory of Kant--that an internal conflict in the human personality between selfishness and altruism produces a universal tension in civilization between individualism and collectivism--to the grandiose and all-encompassing Hegelian scheme of the unfolding of a rational Universal Spirit.

Marx, with his curious amalgam of Hegelianism, Rationalism, and positivism, lit upon the most successful of these philosophies of history. Marx's history, like Hegel's, was deterministic and teleological; but the determinant was economic instead of spiritual, and the goal was world-wide revolution, instead of a world modeled on the Prussian state. In Marx's scheme, man was both the dupe of economic determinism and one of its movers. The purpose of

history was to uncover the natural laws of human economic (which is to say also social and political) relations and, at the same time, to give the laws a nudge when they needed it. It is true, as some critics have pointed out, that Marx's "laws" were invalid the minute someone believed in them, since the actors, forewarned, would rewrite the drama. But it is also true that, if Marxist ideas lacked the universal and eternal validity he claimed for them, they had the value of counteracting a previous tendency to ignore the importance of economic factors in human events. Unfortunately for the progress of historiography, Marxist influence did not stop there.

Like the Judaeo-Christian religion that was its forebear, Marxism was as much a program of action as it was a system of understanding past events. Like all formal philosophies of history, it was a retrogressive step, since it reinstituted a metaphysics over the dead bodies of the Enlightenment. Like formal religion, a superficial Marxism was appealing to the simple-minded souls who wanted a satisfying explanation for the cruel chaos in which they found themselves and who longed for a promise of better things to come. In their monomaniacal determination to make the past conform to the future they prophesied, Marx and Engels replaced the narrow medieval view of man as a somewhat unpromising candidate for posthumous promotion to the City of God with an equally narrow one of man as a purely economic being whose greed would lead to revolution. Bober exposed what is, for the historian, the central fallacy in the view:

> Marx and Engels frequently talk as if all the mind does, with the vast majority of people, is to absorb reality, which reflects itself in the head and transforms itself into ideas. Such a notion is as vague as it is inadequate. How reality "reflects" itself, what goes on in the head, how a fragment of experience transmigrates into an idea, is not made clear. If it is all so simple, why is it not true of other animals?[7]

If, as Hegel maintained, history is a Universal Spirit rationally working its will on the universe, it is a spirit with a sense of humor. How else explain

that Marx's retread-Hegelianism first surfaced as a governmental system in Russia, the country which Marx himself had specifically ruled out as unsuitable for Marxism?

For most of the West, it was not Marx or Hegel but that other towering figure of German history, Leopold von Ranke, who was to be the model for the practice of history. His lasting impact is demonstrated by Barnes's classic History of Historical Writing, in which Ranke not only gets a great deal of space and praise but also the only portrait in the book, its frontispiece. Barnes lists Ranke's great virtues as three: his insistence that historians "make a thorough study of the personality, 'tendencies,' activities and opportunities of the author of each document in order to determine, as far as possible, the 'personal equation' in his record of events"; his adoption from the Romanticists of the idea of a Zeitgeist which dominates every age; and "the doctrine that the historian must view the past wholly freed from the prejudices of the present and must narrate the events of the past as they actually happened--wie es eigentlich gewesen."[8] It is probably one of the history of history's more unjust stereotypes that has left Ranke identified principally with that last, famous phrase, and thereby inaccurately characterized him as purely a "factualist." But it is nevertheless true that the kind of historical tradition he founded was responsible for the simple-minded conclusion among many professional historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century that the facts can speak for themselves. It also led for a time to the near-identification of history with political and diplomatic history--the kind of attitude which led some historians of the Rankian stripe to consider Thucydides, with his dry accounts of the affairs of statesmen, the most modern of historians. Ranke's apostles, particularly the foreign ones who had not been steeped, as he had, in the German idealist tradition, dropped the Romanticist leavening from Ranke and emphasized the factualism.

Meanwhile, the jealousy with which the humanities looked upon the successes of the natural sciences, particularly physics, was leading to a positivist history and offshoots in the new social sciences. The trend was represented in its extreme form in Comte's and Buckle's attempts to reduce men to so many atoms obeying universally valid laws. History's purpose became to codify and therefore predict the behavior of these atom-men in the same way that contemporary physics seemed to be doing in the physical world. Thus, paradoxically, the eighteenth century faith in man's reason, having shattered the old blind belief in a god who guided men's actions, led in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to an equally blind belief in the power of positivist science to find the imagined nature of man. Strangely, despite more than a century of first-rate historical criticism of that delusion, it persists among the majority of American social scientists and many historians.

The Enlightenment itself, Hughes has pointed out, has been unfairly criticized for excesses of this kind which in fact belong to later periods. The eighteenth century, Hughes writes, had in fact an "undogmatic quality," a "flexible use of the concept of reason," and a "sympathetic understanding for 'sensibility' and 'the passions'"--qualities that were sloughed off in the nineteenth century's headlong rush into positivism.[9] Yet it is the mechanistic Rationalism of the nineteenth century, enshrined in the university systems which grew up alongside it, which we have still today. It dominates the social sciences which sprang from historiography and, to a large extent, it dominates historiography itself. The otherwise sensible Barnes, for example, contends that the modern historian cannot operate without a thorough grounding in social science method--a naive position in light of social scientists' notorious inability to agree on similar methods within disciplines, let alone across disciplinary lines. Even historians who do not themselves ape natural science methodology often accept the positivists' claim to the only truly scientific method. Barzun, in his

useful book on historical method,[10] equates science with laboratory experiment and predictability. Ironically, as any number of writers have pointed out, the process of data collection, induction, and verification that nineteenth and twentieth century positivists in the historical and social sciences took to be the keystone of natural science was in fact a highly idealized description of what natural scientists did. And both the method and the assumption of a law-abiding system of atomic particles which underlay it were modified radically by physical scientists in the early twentieth century. But social scientists have by and large held on to their fond view of a tidy universe in which both atom and man observe codifiable laws. This despite a continuing and growing body of theory which has pointed out the folly of applying a natural science method to man. (Or, more accurately, one natural science method, since, to take only two examples, geology and biology had in fact always diverged markedly from the approach in physics.)

Parallel to the line of thought which led history into the blind alley of positivism ran another, more promising development. A long series of thinkers, culminating toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth in Dilthey, Croce, and Ortega, offered to take history out of the traps into which it had gotten itself since the Enlightment. Their accomplishment was, first, simply a refusal (in contrast to the dominant positivist, snapshot view of man in stasis) to forget the heritage of Montesquieu, Hegel, the Middle Ages, the Hebrews. They held fast to the insight that man, through his history, is part of a dynamic chain of existence. The Enlightenment had not forgotten this fact, but in its eagerness to find the presumed rational "core" of man, it wanted to dismiss that feature of man's life as a surface aberration. The Enlightenment thinkers (and their narrower twentieth century followers) wanted to brush aside history in order to get at what they were sure was a permanent, rational human nature. The insights of Freud, Jung, Pareto, and

others into the irrational or non-rational features of man have undermined the assumption of rationality. But it is the fiction of a central "nature" of man which undergirds, generally in unstated form, the methods used by twentieth century social scientists in an attempt to understand man. Ortega describes the methodological weakness of that approach:

> . . .a mere elimination of this residue of rationalism will at once disclose that "the substance" of man is precisely his mutable and historical consistency. Man has no "nature"; he has history. His being is not one but many and manifold, different in each time and each place. To have been aware of this and to have been engrossed in the kaleidoscopic spectacle of history, describing its untold patterns and observing precisely their exclusive and stubborn peculiarities, is the achievement of [Dilthey and his successors]. . . .scientific consciousness is for the first time confronted with the human phenomenon in its reality and not in its idealization.[11]

The second major contribution of Dilthey and his followers had to do with the epistemological differences between man and nature. In studying nature, Dilthey pointed out, man was always the outsider. In studying man, he was observing from the inside. History and the social sciences are always consciousness reflecting upon itself. The primary object of study in man is not, as it is in nature, the external behaviors recorded by the senses--the only reality about man which the positivists would recognize as accessible to study--but consciousness itself. This was not entirely a new idea. The excessively reductionist character of the naturalist method in the human studies had been recognized before Dilthey: man had always known intuitively that humans were more than their animal behavior. And naturalism's miserable performance in its study of man had been recognized. The novelty of Dilthey's work, Hughes points out,

> lay in the fact that it sought to combat positivism with its own weapons. Spurning the help of metaphysics, Dilthey gave explicit recognition to the validity of scientific investigation. Indeed, one of the most telling observations he directed against positivism was the reproach that it was just as metaphysical as the idealist philosophies it had supplanted: the abstractions of positivism were simply implied rather than paraded. With science

> and the scientific method, Dilthey had no quarrel. His aim, rather, was to dispel the current confusion of the world of nature with the world of human activity. Both realms, Dilthey argued, could be studied in scientific fashion. But it was a different type of science from what ordinarily passed by that name that was directed toward the world of culture, society, and history.[12]

Kluback puts it somewhat more succinctly: "Less a positivist than positivistic, [Dilthey] refused to submit the substance of inner experience to irrelevant laws and methods."[13] In Dilthey's "positivism," human meaning, not man's external, measurable actions, was the target of science. The obvious--if temporarily forgotten--identity of observer and observed gave the human studies a unique methodology and a unique problem.

> The fact that, in history and indeed, in the human studies altogether, we are grasping what is, in principle, akin to us, distinguishes these from the natural sciences and gives the human studies a particular advantage. But this is counterbalanced by a particular difficulty; the strong pull of practical life constantly endangers objectivity in the judgment of human affairs and, however much we may strive to detach ourselves from this pull, we are apt to remain bound by the horizon of our age, nation and class. Only insight into these processes can help us to overcome this bias.[13]

As Ortega points out, physico-mathematical reason had failed to find the reality of man because it had sought a nature, a thingness, which does not in fact exist in man. Man is always in process of becoming and he is partly in control of the process.

> Man is not his body, which is a thing, not his soul, psyche, conscience, or spirit, which is also a thing. Man is no thing, but a drama--his life, a pure and universal happening which happens to each one of us and in which each one in his turn is nothing but happening. . . .the mode of being of life, even as simple existing, is not a <u>being already</u>, since the only thing that is given us and that <u>is</u> when there is human life is the having to make it, each one for himself. Life is a gerundive, not a participle: a <u>faciendum</u>, not a <u>factum</u>. Life is a task.[14]

How then is this changing reality of life, as it is manufactured and remanufactured collectively by man over the ages, to be studied? To answer that question, Dilthey set himself the task of creating a critique of historical

reason, analagous to Kant's critique of scientific reason. He never accomplished the task. But his fragmented and unorganized writings pointed toward a solution: Man can understand the consciousness of other men, alive or dead, because the consciousness of others is both in some ways like his own and in some ways quite literally a part of his own consciousness.

> Understanding is the rediscovery of the I in the Thous; the mind rediscovers itself at ever higher levels of connectedness. This sameness of the mind in the I and the Thou and in every subject of a community, in every system of culture and, finally, in the totality of mind and universal history, makes the working together of the different processes in the human studies possible. In these the knowing subject is one with its object. . .[16]

Dilthey often used the illuminating metaphor of a stream to characterize history --a stream from which all men drew their conceptions of life, passed on by countless generations before them, and to which the greatest minds in turn contributed for future generations.

If one accepts Dilthey's line of argument, the implications are profound not just for the study of history, but for all of knowledge. Since, in Dilthey's view, man defines his very self through history, history becomes the preeminent science, subsuming psychology and philosophy and more important even than natural science. Ortega writes:

> . . .[We] become aware of the necessity of another science which must investigate the actual setup of human consciousness, that base and clue to everything else. This science--fundamental because it deals with fundamentals--will therefore start out as psychology, but a psychology planned in a way to illuminate the general structure of consciousness and the generic system of its functioning, in short, the reality of <u>living</u> consciousness in its typical articulation. This science will, by the same token, be the true philosophy. In Dilthey's opinion philosophy is empirical science; it is the last and decisive act in which man <u>qua</u> intelligence takes possession of the <u>whole</u> reality which is <u>his</u> reality.[17]

Ernest Becker argues in his own sweeping and synthesizing (and melodramatically misnamed) work, <u>The Structure of Evil</u>, that Dilthey's line of thought, when fleshed out in the twentieth century by Dewey's pragmatism, resolves the Platonic idealism/materialism dichotomy which had tormented Western thinkers for more

than twenty centuries:

> The merger of science and philosophy is complete, and man keeps his ideality by exercising it in the world. Human meanings become superordinate even in science. . . . The unique result was the complete secularization of human meaning, achieved without belittling man. The inevitable could be accepted: the ideal, or the "really real," is the human creation of meaning. It grows up in the transactional interplay with the material, everyday world. Its ideality can be no more than the continual fabrication of new meanings. By these meanings man enhances his life, and actually quickens the real in the material world.[18]

Not all scholars in qualitative studies, perhaps, will share Becker's optimistic conviction that one can expect soon a reunion of historiography, psychology, sociology, and all the other unintended and quarreling progeny of Enlightenment philosophy. But they will agree that the non-positivist strain in history and social science, dating at least from Giambattista Vico in the early eighteenth century to the Chicago School of social science in the twentieth, offers the most promising approach at hand to the complicated task of explaining man to himself.

NOTES

1. Clifford G. Christians and James W. Carey, "The Logic and Aims of Qualitative Research," mimeographed paper, p. 22.

2. Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man, New Haven, 1944, Yale University Press.

3. Christians and Carey, p. 14.

4. José Ortega y Gasset, Concord and Liberty, New York, 1948, W.W. Norton, p. 148.

5. Ibid., p. 146.

6. Harry Elmer Barnes, A History of Historical Writing, New York, 1963, Dover Publicaitons, p. 245.

7. Mandell M. Bober, Karl Marx's Interpretation of History, Cambridge, 1927, Harvard University Press, p. 298.

8. Barnes, p. 246.

9. H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society, New York, 1958, Vintage, p. 27.

10. Jaques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, The Modern Researcher, 1857, Harcourt, Brace and Company.

11. Ortega, p. 148.

12. Hughes, p. 19.

13. William Kluback, Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of History, New York, 1956, Columbia University Press, p. 85.

14. Wilhelm Dilthey, Pattern and Meaning in History, H.P. Rickman, editor, New York, 1962, Harper and Row, p. 66.

15. José Ortega y Gasset, History as a System, New York, 1961, W.W. Norton & Company, p. 199.

16. Dilthey, pp. 66-68.

17. Concord and Liberty, pp. 162-163.

18. Ernest Becker, The Structure of Evil, New York, 1968, The Free Press, pp. 320-321.